

*He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty: A theological evaluation of Article 6 of the Apostles' Creed and relevant implications for practical theology*

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The thesis of this paper is to demonstrate the significance and necessity of Jesus' ascension for missions and evangelism. Special attention will be given to the impact of that ascension on the relationship between Jesus and his followers. Following a discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in maintaining the bond between Jesus and his disciples even when Jesus was not physically present, with particular reference to the works of Karl Barth, the paper focuses on the nature and implications of Christ's exalted state in heaven, concluding with a look at a few theological and practical implications of the Christian's Holy Spirit-centered relationship with Christ in mission.

Key Words : Ascension, Apostles' Creed, Article 6, right hand of God, sending of the Holy Spirit, mission

Biblical passages dealing with the Jesus Christ' ascension to heaven can generally be grouped into two categories: (1) passages discussing the historicity of his departure, and (2) passages explaining the theological implications of the ascension for humanity and the rest of creation. As Karl Barth has pointed out, of the text's that directly or indirectly deal with Jesus' ascension, only a few deal with the manner in which his body ascended into heaven<sup>i</sup> while most elaborate on the theological implications of the ascension for the church and the world. This paper, therefore, will not address the manner in which Christ left, but rather what that bodily departure means for the Church universal in the present and the future.

## **1. The transformation of the earthly relationship between Jesus and his followers**

Jesus' bodily departure from earth and his return to heaven was not a complete departure from earth nor did it mean a discontinuation of his relationship with his disciples. In fact, Scripture shows that Jesus' post-ascension bodily absence opened the door for a new type of relationship between Jesus and humanity. Jesus' commitment to maintaining a relationship with his disciples is seen in his words to them following his resurrection and prior to his ascension and in his promise, viz., "I am with you always, to the end of the age."<sup>ii</sup> Elaborating on the new nature of

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Jesus' presence with his disciples and their successors, Helmut Thielicke writes, "the ascension does not mean that Jesus Christ *leaves* (italics Thielicke's) us; on the contrary, it means that he comes terribly near us ... Before, when he walked the earth, he was close to only a few – only a little group of disciples; his presence was limited by time and space. Only a few heard his word in those days; today it spans the world." <sup>iii</sup>

Specifically focusing on the temporal nature of Jesus' presence on earth after the ascension, Barth writes:

"Jesus leaves earthly space, the space, that is, which is conceivable to us and which He has sought out for our sakes. He no longer belongs to it as we belong to it. That does not mean that it becomes alien to Him, that this space is not His space too. On the contrary, since He stands above this space, He fulfils it and He becomes present to it. But now, of course, no longer in the way at the time of His revelation and of His earthly activity." <sup>iv</sup>

Echoing Thielicke, Barth highlights that Jesus is still part of our earthly space, but in a new way that allows Jesus to fulfill that space and become present to all of it. The key factor that makes possible this new relationship between Jesus and the world (and the church) is the power and work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>v</sup> The Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to live *in* Jesus, and Jesus to live *in* them, in contrast to their sharing a physical presence with each other. Highlighting the new *depth* with which Jesus was now able to be with his disciples, *The New Interpreter's Bible* states that "there is a sense in which Jesus did not go away at all. Whereas he had once dwelt among them, he now dwelt within them!" <sup>vi</sup>

The ascension and the inauguration of a radically new type of relationship between Jesus and his disciples constituted a radical change from the relationship with Christ that the disciples had experienced up to that point. The impact on the disciples of this drastic change should not be overlooked. The disciples' reception of Jesus' message on this topic and the new reality they would be facing were not always characterized by joy and pain. Indeed, Jesus' words and the events surrounding his ascension and in which he participated were often met with anxiety and grumbling from the disciples. On several occasions, even though Jesus gave his disciples reason to joyfully anticipate his return to heaven,<sup>vii</sup> they found this teaching hard to accept.<sup>viii</sup> While the ascension was part of God's plan and was, indeed, necessary to "inaugurate Jesus' heavenly ministry as King and Lord of the cosmos",<sup>ix</sup> from the perspective of the disciples, their reluctance and difficulty in apprehending the depth and accepting the full meaning of Jesus' teaching is understandable. The Greek term, μαθηται, denotes disciples, i.e. "persons who attached themselves to Jesus, who followed Him habitually, and who had even broken off from their ordinary occupations in order to accompany Him." <sup>x</sup> Once one understands the nature of the relationship that had developed between Jesus and his disciples up to that point as μαθηται, it becomes easier to see how Jesus' return to the Father and his departure from his disciples would be emotionally troubling and hard for them to accept. To get a sense of the loss the disciples

must have felt it is critical to consider seriously the visual representation of the ascension event in Acts 1:9 where Luke recounts that Jesus was “taken up” (NIV) or a cloud “took him out of their sight” (NRSV), painting a picture of something being taken away from the disciples, i.e. something which for the disciples constituted a significant loss.

However, in spite of the disciples’ ambivalent stance toward the ascension, Scripture provides a balance to the disciples’ negativity through the much more positive view of the ascension that can be seen in the words of Jesus recorded in John 16:7, that “it is expedient for you that I go away.”<sup>xi</sup>

Attempting to balance the positive way in which Jesus describes his own ascension and the disciples’ lukewarm reaction to Jesus’ words, the *The New Interpreter’s Bible* states:

“Sometimes there is an unrecognized good in the going. A parent takes a small boy to camp and goes home without him. ‘A cloud received him’ out of the child’s sight. But his going was for the child’s good; the child must learn how to live with his contemporaries, how to carry his own load, how to play and how to get along without the constant oversight of his parents.”<sup>xii</sup>

Scripture does not offer much detail as to how Jesus felt about the changes that would occur, following his ascension, in the relationships between himself and those who had been particularly close to him during his earthly ministry. Nor does Scripture tell us much about Jesus’ personal feelings concerning his bodily departure from earth. However, the Bible does speak with clarity concerning the numerous benefits that humanity was to receive as a result of Jesus’ ascension. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest speak glowingly of how glorious and beneficial it is for all believers that Jesus ascended to heaven, regardless of reservations expressed concerning Jesus’ ascension by people in Jesus’ day or now, some of whom might even prefer that he were still with us in bodily form. Lewis and Demarest offer a detailed exposition of the rich theological significance that the ascension carries, illuminating why Jesus can speak in such positive and hopeful terms about the ascension. According to Lewis and Demarest:

- 1 ) “The ascension marked the end of Christ’ incarnate appearances and revelations.” Christ’ incarnated work here on earth is done, and through the written Word, followers of Christ are now able to be “thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:17).”
- 2 ) “Christ’s ascension reversed his *kenosis*.” As Christ returns to his heavenly origin, he is no longer limited in the use of his divine attributes.
- 3 ) “Christ’s ascension inaugurated his heavenly ministry as King and Lord of the cosmos.” Thus, all powers (including Satan and death) must now submit to him. (1 Peter 3:22).
- 4 ) “Christ’s ascension clarified the meaning of his present rule on earth.” Christ’s kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36), and it cannot be identified with any particular place or institution.
- 5 ) “Christ’s ascension also marked the beginning of his present ministries as head of the

church in at least three ways.”

- a. As head of the church, Christ sends the Holy Spirit to believers (Acts 2:33).
  - b. Christ now builds the church against which even the gates of hell cannot prevail (Matthew 16:18).
  - c. Christ now intercedes for the believing members of the church (Rom. 8:34, 1 Tim. 2:5).
- 6) “The resurrected Christ’s exaltation will culminate in his powerful and glorious visible return in the clouds of heaven as he ascended (Acts 1:11).”
- 7) “Christ’s ascension is the first instance of the rapture of a glorified body (1 Cor. 15:20)” and “[a]nyone who believes in the ascension of Christ’s glorified body should not have insuperable difficulties believing in the possibility of the ascension of others in glorified bodies.”
- 8) “Christ’s ascension assures the existence of a resurrected and glorified human body and spirit in the Father’s immediate presence.”<sup>xiii</sup>

## **2. Theological ramifications of the transformation of the new relationship between Jesus and his disciples**

In addition to the change in the earthly relationship between Jesus and his disciples that was brought about by the ascension, Scripture also shows that there are “heavenly” ramifications for those who share a new post-ascension relationship with Christ. According to Ephesians 2:5-6, “even when we were dead through our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

Not only does Jesus still remain a part of our world, our life now includes “a seat in the heavenly places”. This is better understood after a look at what is meant here by the term “heavenly places.” Nineteenth century Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge points out that “heavenly places” is used throughout the book of Ephesians simply to describe heaven. In fact, in Ephesians, the word heaven can point to several different realities. The term can refer to the (1) “atmospheric heavens in which the clouds have their habitation”: (2) “the stellar heavens in which the sun, moon and stars dwell”: (3) “the third heavens, i.e. the place where God specially manifests his presence and where the glorified body of Christ now is”, or (4) “the state into which believers are introduced by their regeneration.”<sup>xiv</sup> Hodge further describes the fourth category as a “state of purity, exaltation and favor with God, into which his children are even in the world introduced.”<sup>xv</sup> This fourth category denotes the “heavens” to which Christians belong and in which they are seated with Jesus. When one is in Christ Jesus, and Christ Jesus is in him or her, the entire world to which that person ultimately belongs changes along with the identity that the person has received through Christ. That person’s citizenship is no longer limited to this world but includes citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20). Followers of Christ, in their humanity, do not reside in heaven in the same sense that Jesus does. We do reside, however, “within the pale

of God's kingdom...the lowest place of this kingdom, the mere suburbs of the heavenly city".<sup>xvi</sup>

Describing the transition from being "outside of Christ" to being "in Christ" as a change of citizenship from earth to heaven as a result of Jesus' ascension may seem drastic, but Paul's description of this kind of transformation makes more sense when one understands the changes that take place and the privileges afforded one when that one becomes a citizen in the "heavenly places". Citizens of heaven "are freed from the condemnation of the law, from the dominion of Satan, from the lethargy and pollution of spiritual death; [they] are reconciled to God, made partakers of his Spirit, as the principle of everlasting life; they are adopted into his family and have a right to all the privileges of the sons [and daughters] of God both in this life and in that which is to come." <sup>xvii</sup>

These blessings of being citizens of heaven are not something that followers of Christ will receive only in the future, but are, in fact, available now to those who are "in Christ". The implications of Hodge's above statement is that as followers of Christ, Christians experience a new life with Christ that can be appropriately expressed as a life that occupies the "heavenly places." Jesus' ascension opened the door for a new type of citizenship in an entirely new kingdom. This kingdom to which people now belong is no longer seen simply as an earthly kingdom where Jesus joins them, but rather, a kingdom that is radically differentiated from the earthly kingdom; indeed, it is a heavenly kingdom, because people are, in the fullest sense, in Christ.<sup>xviii</sup>

### 3. Jesus' ascension and Christian mission

Jesus' ascension was critical for the establishment of a new union between Christ and believers. The value and importance of this act should not be minimized, for it fulfilled Jesus' promises to his disciples that he would not leave them orphaned<sup>xx</sup> and that he would be with them to the end of the age<sup>xx</sup>. The disciples certainly were beneficiaries of this new type of relationship (and its power), a relationship that they would receive as a result of Jesus' ascension, because in some ways, he was more real to them after the ascension than he was before it.<sup>xxi</sup> The ascension of Jesus is directly related to the sending of the Holy Spirit, the sending of whom allowed for the continuing internal unity of Christ with his disciples and indeed served as a great source of comfort to them. Scripture makes it clear, however, that the sending of the Holy Spirit was more than just an attempt to provide comfort and to establish a new union with the disciples in whom Christ dwelt. Mission, witness, greater works, and bearing fruit for Jesus are the foci of Scripture when it speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>xxii</sup> With the inauguration of the earthly activity of the Holy Spirit, the ministry of Jesus was transformed from a local ministry centered on the earthly existence of Jesus, into a truly globalized mission activity powered by the free and unfettered work of the Holy Spirit. As a result of the globalization of Jesus' ministry brought about by the Holy Spirit, the manifestation of Jesus' power was no longer limited by geographical location or the kind of physical limitation Jesus had experienced during his pre-ascension earthly existence. It was the coming of the Holy Spirit that made it possible for Jesus to give his disciples and their successors a grand mission (i.e. "*The Great Commission*") to carry out when Jesus

was no longer present bodily on earth. Without the divine help of the Holy Spirit, the commission Jesus gave to his disciples to take the Gospel message to the ends of the earth would have been a task impossible to fulfill, considering the physical limitations of the disciples and their successors. As we see in John chapter 14, the ascension was necessary for the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's coming was the foundation needed for the fulfillment on earth of the Great Commission<sup>xxiii</sup>, one of Jesus' last great commandments on earth to his disciples. As a result of the ascension and the subsequent coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples and all other believers received new "power"<sup>xxiv</sup> and a "Helper."<sup>xxv</sup> Without this "Helper," the Christian's commitment to the mission received from Jesus and the Christian's work for the fulfillment of the Great Commission would be in vain.

The connection between mission on the one hand, the ascension and the subsequent sending of the Holy Spirit on the other is made even more evident when taking a closer look at the "greater works" described in John 14, works which would be performed by the disciples. The Gospel writer John describes the essential importance of the Holy Spirit when he writes that the reason those who believe in Jesus will be able to do the works that Jesus did at that time is *precisely because* Jesus is ascending to the Father. In fact, not only will Jesus' ascension to the Father allow for people to do Jesus' works, that ascension will further allow them to do even "greater works". The "greater works" performed by the disciples and their successors who are empowered by the Holy Spirit, become essential to the post-ascension earthly ministry of Jesus, and it is worth quoting Godet on this point as he offers enlightening insight on the connection between the necessity of the ascension and the beginning of these "greater works" that were to be performed by Christ's followers.

“[H]e shall do even greater things, refers, not to more extraordinary outward works--the greatness of miracles is not thus measured (Weiss)--but to works of a superior *nature* even to corporeal healings. What St. Peter did at Pentecost, and St. Paul did throughout the world,--what a simple preacher, a simple believer effects in causing the Spirit to descend into a heart — Jesus could not do during His sojourn on earth. For, in order that such things should be realized, it was necessary that the wall of separation between God and men should have been destroyed and the Holy Spirit have been given to mankind” (Gess); in other words, that, as the end of the verse says, the glorification of Jesus should have been accomplished; “because I go to the Father;” ... The branch, united to the vine, can bear fruits which the vine itself cannot bear.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

One participates in these greater works by abiding in Jesus through the Holy Spirit.<sup>xxvii</sup> The Holy Spirit is also referred to as the “Helper” and serves as the “Spirit of Truth” that connects believers to Jesus by abiding in them<sup>xxviii</sup> and reminding and teaching them everything that Jesus taught.<sup>xxix</sup> When one is connected to the global ministry of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, he or she can produce great fruit; fruit that Jesus would describe as greater than what he himself produced

during his earthly existence. On the other hand, without the Holy Spirit providing a connection to Jesus Christ, a person “can do nothing.” (John 15:5) The essential importance of Jesus’ ascension to the life and mission of a Christian is clear. Apart from the Holy Spirit, humanity, as the branch that is connected to Christ the vine would face insurmountable challenges in seeking to connect to Jesus. Furthermore, from the divine perspective, without the connection to Christ, no one would be a fruit bearer, and all of humanity would be “thrown away like a branch and wither” and be “thrown into the fire, and burned.” (John 15:6). With the ascension, a new mission paradigm with an expanded global perspective, a perspective which was not possible during the pre-ascension earthly ministry, had been inaugurated along with the supply of divine help needed for people to meet and accomplish the call.

#### **4. Comparing Jesus-centered missions and Holy Spirit-centered missions**

While Jesus was here on earth, his physical body was the primary instrumentality through which he carried out his works. John 3:16 demonstrates God’s love for the whole world and teaches us clearly that God’s desire is that all men and women hear the Gospel of repentance and salvation and be adopted as children of God.<sup>xxx</sup> When Christ took on human flesh and became “God With Us” (Matthew 1:23) he assumed all the limitations of being human, including the limitations of living with a physical, earthly body. For example, the incarnated Christ needed rest.<sup>xxxi</sup> He needed time away from the crowds.<sup>xxxii</sup> Furthermore, the fully human Christ was closer to certain people than he was to others.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The physical limitations Jesus accepted as a necessary aspect of his incarnation were essential to his living a full human life and dying on the cross as the representative of all humanity. However, it also meant that he emptied himself of the divine omnipotence and thus limited the breadth and scope of his earthly ministry. That the geographical scope of Jesus’ ministry, as that ministry is recorded in the Gospels, is much more of a local ministry and a far cry from the much more expansive perspective of the Great Commission, is not unrelated to the physical limitations Jesus had as a human. If the Great Commission given to the disciples was to be a mission with a realistic chance of fulfillment, then it goes without saying that the mission strategy must be adapted from one that seeks to reach a relatively small group of people in a small area of the ancient Middle East, to a plan that now extends to the four corners of the earth. Jesus speaks of this new mission with confidence. Jesus does not simply *request* that his disciples be his witnesses to the ends of the earth; rather, Jesus simply says that they *will* be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. The coming of the Holy Spirit transforms the disciples’ mission platform from a group of several cities to a new and grand global stage on which the disciples now stand. Indeed, the primary goal of the disciples is now to be the arms and feet of Jesus in globalizing Jesus’ ministry.

#### **5. The Authority behind missions; Jesus on the right hand of God the Father Almighty**

The image of the “right hand” is used throughout Scripture to illustrate might (e.g. Psalm 80:15-

16; 89:13), and the right side of a king, for example, was considered a place of honor (e.g. 1 Kings 2:19; Psalms 45:9). In ancient times, kings would place at their right hand those whom they wished to honor, to place in their administration, or to give special authority.

When one confesses that Jesus is sitting on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, he/she is confessing that Christ has passed from humility to exaltation. Christ's humble beginning is well documented in the Gospels. Being born to peasant parents, Jesus enters this world humbly. Having assumed human form, he became subject to all the pressures, temptations, and hardships of human life. He was betrayed; he was lied about; he was given an illegal trial<sup>xxxiv</sup>; he was spat on, whipped in public, and crucified on a cross between two known criminals.<sup>xxxv</sup> This pre-ascension image of Jesus and the human suffering he bore stands in bold relief to the post-ascension image of the exalted Jesus who is now confessed to be sitting on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

Jesus' highest state of exaltation is palpable when one realizes that no *created person* could take a place at the right hand of God. The complete otherness and holiness of God the Father might have been the reason behind the rhetorical question in Hebrews 1:13 which asks "to which of the angels has [God the Father] ever said 'Sit at my right hand?'" Not even angels lay claim such an authoritative position as "sitting on the right hand of God."<sup>xxxvi</sup> Sitting at the right hand of God the Father, Jesus now has been given a seat of honor, power, and glory that has been ascribed to no one else.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

It is of no mean significance that Jesus' exaltation is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Article 6 is a confession not only of Jesus' exaltation but also a confession that through Jesus, a prophetic element of God's plan has been fulfilled. As part of God's overall plan, Jesus was destined to return to heaven after his earthly mission was completed. For example, in this regard one could cite Psalm 110:1 and also the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 26:64. Indeed, Jesus' position at the right hand of God is an integral aspect of the overarching plan of God.

The exaltation of Jesus and the authority he receives at the right hand of God is further apparent in many Scripture verses including Matthew 28:18, which demonstrates that everything in "heaven and on earth" is under Jesus' authority,<sup>xxxviii</sup> Colossians 1:18b-20, which speaks of Jesus as having "first place in everything.", and Ephesians 1:20-23 which names Jesus as one who is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...not only in this age but also in the age to come.". Author Lois Malcolm states that all "history and the cosmos" are subjected to the exalted Christ.<sup>xxxix</sup> From a practical, pastoral perspective, Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears colorfully elucidate some of the everyday details of this exaltation:

"Today, Jesus alone rules and reigns in exalted glory as Lord over man and beast, male and female, gays and straights, young and old...simple and wise, married and single...Christians and non-Christians, angels and demons, the living and the dead, every religion, every spirituality, every philosophy...every



Sam Murchie : He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty:

word, every deed...every inch of creation which he claims as his possession  
under his throne that is over all.”<sup>xi</sup>

Barth emphasizes the certainty and continuation of Jesus’ authority and domain no matter what may happen here on earth. In short Jesus’ exalted position in heaven and earth is constant.

“Whatever prosperity or defeat may occur in our space, whatever may become  
and pass away, there is one constant, one thing that remains and continues, this  
sitting of His at the right hand of God the Father.”<sup>xli</sup>

Through faith, Christians have the assurance that no matter how chaotic, dreadful, or sin-ridden the world may be, nothing that can happen will cause the world to spin out of God’s control. As noted by Jesus and Paul, persecution, hardship, and fear are still present with us in this age. That we are called to endure until the final day<sup>xlii</sup> and that the glory that Jesus is ultimately to receive (and we are to receive as well<sup>xliii</sup>) is not yet fully realized, indicates that the work of Jesus Christ and the battle against sin continue, but always, of course, under the exalted Lordship of Christ. Paul writes with clarity about the battle between Jesus and the devil that continues even today.<sup>xliv</sup> Christians are called to be on guard against the powers of Satan,<sup>xlv</sup> to go through strict training to be an apostle for God,<sup>xlvi</sup> and to be active participants in the spiritual warfare that remains a present reality.<sup>xlvii</sup> Though the battle against sin is still being fought and its effects are still being felt, when Article 6 of the Apostles’ Creed is confessed, as well as a declaration of trust that everything is under Christ’s domain, Article 6 also becomes a statement of confidence that the ultimate Lordship of Jesus Christ will prevail. In Philippians 2:9-11 Paul expresses the eschatological hope to which Christians look forward with confidence: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

## **6. Eschatological significance of the 6<sup>th</sup> Article.**

The first article of the Apostles’ Creed, (“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven earth.”) focuses on the first person of the Trinity, God the Father. God the Father is confessed as the all powerful being, the Creator of everything, independent and outside of any realm the human mind can fathom. Contained in these words is the confession that is more fully described in the Nicene Creed, namely, that God is “Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” The article proclaims the existence of God as the source behind all physical and spiritual reality.

Articles two through seven of the Apostles’ Creed focus on the 2nd Person of the Trinity, i.e. Jesus Christ, God the Son, and specifically on the life of Jesus Christ as comprehended in a historical context. Jesus was conceived, was born, suffered, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died, was buried, descended into hell, rose, and ascended into heaven. It is in the 6<sup>th</sup> Article that

the confession moves from looking back at history toward making a confession about the present. Starting with the word “sitteth”, “the perfect tenses lie behind us and we enter the realm of the present.”<sup>xlviii</sup> As Barth explains, in his exalted position next to God the Father, in a very real sense Jesus is functioning in ultimate reality, i.e., the reality of heaven that corresponds with our reality here on earth.<sup>xlix</sup> The ascension does not relegate Jesus’ work to a realm in a separate world or time. As Jesus is *presently sitting* (my italics) on the right hand of God Almighty with all the authority and dominion that accompanies his rule as the exalted Christ, history enters a new era. To confess in the sixth article that Jesus is at the right hand of God is not simply to confess what happened after the resurrection. It is, rather, to confess the present reality of the glorified Christ, which then sets the stage for the third phrase of the Apostles’ Creed that focuses on the present but looks toward the future with hope.

Article 8 is a confession of one’s belief in the third person of the Trinity, i.e. the Holy Spirit. The post-ascension era is now one in which the power of God on earth is exercised through the work and power of the Holy Spirit, rather than through the bodily and earthly presence of God the Son. Barth writes, “In the New Testament, the report of Jesus’ ascending and sitting on the right hand of God the Father Almighty constitutes the conclusion of the reports of Jesus Christ’s Resurrection... What is involved is this transition, the change from revelation time to our time.”<sup>l</sup> Everything that we need in order to grow in Christ (2 Tim 3:17) has been revealed to us by Jesus during his earthly mission. The ascension of the risen Christ is a turning point of sorts in the Apostles’ Creed since after the discussion of the ascension, the discussion becomes focused on the current state of events and/or the anticipation of what God will do in the future. The community of faith has entered a new phase and “the beginning of this time is ours.”<sup>li</sup>

## 7. The practical theological significance of the 6th article of the Apostles’ Creed

The change in our relationship with God carries with it a call to action on our part. Barth writes, “The conclusion of Christ’s work is therefore not an opportunity given to the Apostles for idleness, but it is their being sent out into the world.”<sup>lii</sup> Indeed, the absence of Christ as a bodily presence on earth brings with it a particular significance for those who claim to be his disciples. Through his own ascension and subsequent sending of the Holy Spirit, Christ has given his followers, through the charge of the Great Commission, the opportunity and responsibility to be an essential part of God’s plan for the world. Not only has Christ given us the privilege and challenge of being a fruit-bearing branch for his globalized mission, he has also provided us with the necessary tools to carry out that mission. The mission of God is not meant to occur “apart from man’s participation, apart from the praise to God from their lips, apart from their feet and hands, by which they ought to become messengers of the Gospel.”<sup>liiii</sup>

We are taught that God’s missionary activity includes God’s disciples. When the New Testament describes the work of the Holy Spirit in spreading the Gospel, it does so always in the context of working through or with the followers of Christ. This particular way in which the Holy Spirit

works is evident, for example, in Mark 16:20, where the Gospel writer shows that the Lord Jesus worked *with* the disciples to confirm Jesus' words and perform various signs. Again, in Acts 2:4, we see a depiction of a mighty inbreaking of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In this scene, the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to the extent that they "began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability;" instead of all the disciples speaking Aramaic, the group of people from various nations who had gathered in Jerusalem were surprised to hear their own language being spoken by the disciples. The sudden multilingual speaking that took place was a direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit and helped spark the explosion of the faith that we see in the following chapters of Acts. The Lord Jesus did not work for, on behalf of, or independently of the disciples to accomplish the Holy Spirit's task. God's people are part of God's work.

The imagery in John 15 of Jesus as the vine and his followers as the branches that produce fruit and are pruned to produce even more fruit, helps shed light on the role, responsibility, and privilege given to Christians as a result of their connection to Jesus through the Holy Spirit. For fruit to be borne, the vine and its branches must be connected. As indicated earlier, being connected to the vine is vital for the life and productivity of the branch. It is important, though, not to miss the critical difference in the role and function of the vine and the branches, a difference that is, all too often, overlooked. The vine and the branches work together, each playing an important and vital role in the overall purpose of the plant as a whole. Indeed, it is from the vine that the branches receive the energy, nutrients, and vitality necessary for bearing fruit. It is not the vine, but the branches, however, that are the fruit bearing parts of the plant. The branches are dependent upon the vine for their life and productivity. If the plant is to fulfill its purpose, it is essential that the branches carry out their responsibilities. In other words, the thrust of this imagery is that the followers of Christ are the ones tasked with bearing fruit. Nevertheless, it must also be said that the only reason they are in that role is because, through the Holy Spirit, Christ is their foundation. Through this arrangement, God has chosen to make God's followers an absolutely essential part of God's mission here on earth.

It is sometimes said that *we* can do nothing and it is *God* who does all the work. This however, is an incorrect understanding of the way in which the Trinitarian God has chosen to work. It also robs one of the privilege, satisfaction, and joy of being *more than a conqueror* in all things. In order more fully to understand and experience the joy of being in Christ and used by Christ, the Christian must recognize his or her role and not negate the responsibility each of us has been given to bear fruit for the Vine, Jesus Christ.

Lois Malcolm states that the reason we have been given the Holy Spirit and all the benefits that come with that relationship is not so that "we can hoard or contain [those benefits], but so that we can, like Christ, be sent, in this time between his ascension and his final return, as ambassadors for reconciliation in the world."<sup>liv</sup> It is critical to remember what Jesus commands us to do with the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not send the Spirit so that his followers could lie content

in their own communities with no vision for the world around them. The great news of the Gospel is that the redemptive work of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21) extends to everyone, to those who have heard and to those who have yet to hear. The Spirit enables the believer to fulfill his or her calling from God to carry out God's plan of reconciliation in the world by taking this message to the ends of the earth. All creation is commanded to listen to the Gospel; and with the Holy Spirit as a guide, Christians are called to be deliverers of this message.<sup>lv</sup>

Article 7 of the Apostles' Creed is a confession that Jesus will be coming back to judge between "the living" (those in Christ) and "the dead" (those outside of Christ). However, history has not yet reached that point. When Barth speaks of the present time as a time of opportunity, he does not mean that the preaching of the Gospel is something the Christian can choose to do or not to do. Those of us who claim the blessings of the Holy Spirit are given a challenge and a command to conquer or overcome, just as Jesus conquered and overcame before he assumed his place at the right hand of the Father.<sup>lvi</sup> Christians, empowered as we are by the Holy Spirit who was sent to us following Christ's ascension, have received a call to mission. Paul writes that we must fight the good fight and keep the faith.<sup>lvii</sup> The writers of the New Testament make it clear that we are able to fight the good fight, as did Paul, through the power of Jesus Christ that is poured out upon us. Indeed, the Spirit-filled lives of the eleven disciples serve as great examples of those who conquered and overcame for the sake of Christ. The Holy Spirit that empowered the disciples' passion for their work, their endurance to the end, and the dedication of their entire lives to the fulfillment of the Great Commission is the same Holy Spirit that leads all Christians today.<sup>lviii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p.125.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 28:20 (New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)). Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the NRSV.)

<sup>iii</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *I BELIEVE The Christian's Creed* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p.196-197.

<sup>iv</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p.125.

<sup>v</sup> Acts 1:8, 2:4, 17-18; 4:8; Acts 10:45.

<sup>vi</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, Walter Russell Bowie, et. al., *The New Interpreter's Bible, Acts, Romans, Volume IX*, (New York Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1954), p.29.

<sup>vii</sup> Gordon L. Lewis, Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), p.471.

<sup>viii</sup> John 14:60.

<sup>ix</sup> Gordon L. Lewis, Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan 1996), p.473.

<sup>x</sup> Frederic Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1978), p.603.

<sup>xi</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, Walter Russell Bowie, et. al., *The New Interpreters Bible, Acts, Romans, Volume IX*, (New York Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1954), p.29.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>xiii</sup> Gordon L. Lewis, Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), pp.474-475.

<sup>xiv</sup> Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of Ephesians*, (Wilmington, Delaware, Sovereign Grace, 1972), p.40.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid., p.40.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., p.40.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., p.41.

<sup>xviii</sup> Focusing on the exalted state of humanity that we now enjoy as a result of Jesus' bodily ascension, Barth

Sam Murchie : He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty:

comments that “Christ is now, as the Bearer of humanity, as our Representative, in the place where God is and in the way in which God is. Our flesh, our human nature, is exalted in Him to God. The end of His work is that we are with Him above. We are with Him beside God.” (Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p.125)

As a result of the ascension, there is now a twofold dimension to the “togetherness” shared by Jesus and his followers. This togetherness allows all humanity, and not just those close to Christ, such as the disciples who had immediate access to him, to be in relationship with Christ here on earth. Furthermore, our own humanity has been raised to an exalted position in heaven, and through Jesus, those who are in Christ are represented before God and are, in that sense, seated in heaven.

- xix John 14:18.
- xx Matthew 28:20.
- xxi George Arthur Buttrick, Walter Russell Bowie, et. al., *The New Interpreters Bible, Acts, Romans, Volume IX*, (New York Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1954), p.29.
- xxii Acts 1:8; John 14:12; John 15:2.
- xxiii Matthew 28:20.
- xxiv Acts 1:8.
- xxv John 14:16. The NRSV notes that Greek word Παρκλητοῦ can be translated as “Helper” or “Advocate”.
- xxvi Godet *Commentary of John’s Gospel*, 836.
- xxvii Ibid., p.854.
- xxviii John 14:7.
- xxix John 14:26.
- xxx Luke 24:46-49; Mark 16:15-18; John 3:17; Titus 2:11; Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 15:22; 1 Timothy 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9.
- xxxi John 4:4-6.
- xxxii Matthew 5:1; Luke 4:42.
- xxxiii Luke 9:28-36, John 13:23, John 19:26.
- xxxiv Mark 14:1, Matthew 26:59, Luke 22:67-71, Mark 14:53-65, 15:1, Matthew 26:63-66, Mark 14:53-65.
- xxxv Matthew 27:38.
- xxxvi Hodge *An Exposition of Ephesians*, p.29.
- xxxvii In their book, *Vintage Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), Pastor Mark Driscoll and theologian Gerry Breshears speak of the exalted status that Christians have in heaven while living on earth as being “positionally seated in Christ.” (155) They explain that by being positionally seated at the right hand of God the Father, Christians share Christ’s authority over Satan and demons. Though the expression “positionally seated in Christ” is not without ambiguity, the authors’ point regarding a profound link between a Christian’s relationship with the exalted Christ and a Christian’s daily victories over evil is well taken.
- xxxviii Matthew 28:18.
- xxxix Lois Malcolm, *He Ascended into Heaven and Is Seated at the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), p.164.
- xl Driscoll *Vintage Jesus*, pp.158-159.
- xli Barth *Dogmatics in Outline*, p.126.
- xlii Philippians 1:10.
- xliii 1 Corinthians 15:57-58 2Thessalonians 1:11-12..
- xliv This battle has already been won by Christ. Revelation 5:5-6, 12:11
- xlv 1 Peter 5:8.
- xlvi 1 Corinthians 9:25.
- xlvii Ephesians 6:12.
- xlviii Barth *Dogmatics In Outline*, p.126
- xlx Ibid., p.126.
- l Ibid., p.125.
- li Ibid., p.128.
- lii Ibid., p.127.
- liii Ibid., p.128.

<sup>liv</sup> Malcolm, *He Ascended into Heaven and Is Seated at the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty*, p.172.

<sup>lv</sup> Barth, p.128.

<sup>lvi</sup> Malcolm, *He Ascended into Heaven and Is Seated at the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty*, p.166.

<sup>lvii</sup> 2 Timothy 4:7.

<sup>lviii</sup> This idea is popularly expressed in the chorus lyrics of the recent song “You Are Here” by the Australian worship band “Hillsong” (2007 Hillsong Publishing, Written by Dave George & Grant Pankratz, CCLI Licence No. 224347).

“The same power that conquered the grave lives in me  
Your love, That rescued the earth lives in me, lives in me.”